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HOW ENSIGN SHELDON BROUGHT THE CAPTIVES BACK

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A POEM READ AT THE UNVEILING OF A MEMORIAL
TABLET TO THE MEMORY OF JOHN SHELDON, ON
THE SITE OF THE "OLD INDIAN HOUSE,"
BUILT BY HIM, AND HIS DEERFIELD
RESIDENCE, AUGUST 22, 1911.

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HOW ENSIGN SHELDON BROUGHT THE CAPTIVES BACK.

Again the well-remembered scene
The quiet street, elm-arched and maple-bowered,
The spacious houses stoutly set between,—
Each quaint old dwelling
Its individual story telling,
With sad or happy memories richly dowered;—
The old church, many-windowed, lofty-towered,
Lifting its shaft of white
Above the leafy green
Into the ampler light;
The climbing hill-side, laurel-flowered
When June puts on her morning-dress
Of many-tinted loveliness;
The spreading meadows, harvestful or shorn,
Their golden stubble or green-glancing corn
Here islanding Pine Hill, there stretching far
To Sugar-Loaf's blue steep, or Mount Tom's saw-tooth scaur.
Here East Rock lifts its nearer beetling heights,
Recalling youthful climbing joys and venturous delights,
Up winding paths, by doubtful devious ways,
Whence, eastward, Toby's couchant lion sleeps,
And far Mount Grace's domelike forehead peeps
Above the Notch in Northfield's wooded steeps.
Between, Connecticut shines in the morning rays,
Recalling Peskeompskut's memorable days,—
The summit gained, the valley's fair surprise
Rewards our weary feet and asking eyes;
Pocumtuck's tortuous line below us lies,—
River of many windings, making light

Of settled bound and territorial right;—
While parallelograms of varied crops
Far stretch till hill or stream their bounty stops;
And over them the Sunsick hills lie fair,
With Hoosac's range beyond, and still above them there,
Graylock's far-crowning summit, blue and bare.

How near to-day
That summer noon-tide almost sixty years away
When first I trod this since familiar street,
Its picturesque and antique style,
Unlike to all that I had known erewhile,
And to my youthful fancy passing fair and sweet;—
The old Academy, then deeply elm-embowered,
And thronged by many feet,—
Now grown a silent treasury of the Past,
With relics of the old-time life each year more richly dowered,—
By old associations once again empowered,
Grows vocal with young voices long since stilled,
And rich with school-time memories gathering fast
Of long bright days with genial studies filled;
The loved Preceptor's kindling voice and eye,
The happy comradeships of days gone by,—
Making the ancient structure, in the far recall,
In other senses a Memorial Hall.

Comes back the vision of our Sunday ways.
The meetinghouse, well-thronged in those more churchly days;
The wonder that befell

When the blind sexton crossed the street to ring the bell,
Or waited, watch in hand, precise the hour to tell,
As his skilled fingers note the minutes well;—

Or when the sightless patriarch of the place
With solemn vision written on his face,
Took his accustomed place the preacher's stand beside;—
His reverend form lending the lofty pulpit grace,
Scripture and song by his high aspect glorified:

Conscience incarnate, which the town had grown
Almost to worship in the long years known
Of faithful witness to the truth alone.

Among the memoried ways
Clear seen through all the intervening days,
Come back the summer evenings' quiet grace,
And cool delights of the old swimming-place;
Where the light foot-bridge swung across the stream,
Above its shadow, and the twilight gleam
Lighted the silent water;—all these memories seem
Fair in remembrance as a happy dream.

Then, on the homeward path the hush profound
Of the "Old Burying Ground,"
With its rude heraldry of death
Carved on the moss-grown monuments around;
And, mingled with the soil beneath,
The ever-honored dust
Of valiant men and just,
First fathers of the ancient town
Who by "y^e Barbarous Enemy" were stricken down:—
The good first pastor and his slaughtered wife,
"Redeemed" from every earthly care and strife,—
As he before from lingering thrall and pain,
To gather in his scattered flock again,
And write his chronicle of captive life;
And the vast common grave to which were borne
The forty victims of one fatal morn.

That fateful morning! From this peaceful scene,
And small events of our own early years,
Pass we to story of the elder time,
Recall to-day heroic memories old,
Renew the record of their toils and tears,
Their deeds of valor and their trust sublime,
And in our homely rhyme
Retell a tale a hundred times retold.

Near thirty years were sped
Since the fray at the fatal Brook,
When the harvest wains met ambuscade,
Where the "Flower of Essex" fell,
And the dear-bought "Falls Fight" victory
Broke the power of the hostile tribes near by.

The stricken settlers who forsook
Their homes in that terrible time
Had come back again to dwell;
And a new generation tell
Their children, in prose or rhyme,
Of the horrors that befell,
And the old-time homes they battled for
In the bloody days of Philip's War.
The town had risen again,
And builded anew, and thriven amain;
There were forty homes in Deerfield Street
And church and civic order complete:—
Strong-built houses and stout stockade
Lessened the fear of savage raid;
Though in field and far out-lying farm
Came the fatal shot and the dread alarm,
As from hills around the foe watched well,
And like a blasting thunderbolt fell.

But more terrible days began,
With the War of good Queen Anne,
When the friendly tribes, half against their will,
Were embroiled of set purpose by crafty Vaudreuil,
And sent without mercy to burn, capture and kill,
Under bold Martigny and fell Rouville.
Then came ambush and slaughter and harrying
Into captivity carrying
Women and children and stalwart men,
Slain on the wood-path by river and glen,
Starved and frozen and wearied to death;
Struck down when they stumbled or stopped for breath;
With gauntlet and fagot to torture the brave,
Held the Jesuit's vassal, the savage's slave,—
Children lost to their mothers, babes torn from the arms,
Sent to towns far remote, or to wide-scattered farms,—
Such were some of the border-life terrors and fears
Of New England for more than a hundred years.

Among the first to feel
The storm of shot and steel

From Canada pouring down,—
Troops of white men and hordes of red,
By the spirit of hate and vengeance led,
By hope of conquest and plunder fed,
And with blessing of priest and zealot sped,—
Was our devoted town.

The end of winter was drawing on
When rumors of peril came thick and fast,
And the little provincial garrison
Had come to strengthen the settlers at last;—
The next day would the last day of winter be,
The Leap Year Day of the first Leap Year
Of the fateful eighteenth century;
And the morning was coming on;—
Within the stockade all were gathered for sleep,
Meaning watch and ward securely to keep.

The sentry was pacing his weary round,
When his stranger ear caught a homelike sound,
A remembered, familiar lullaby,
Which a woman crooned in a house near by
To quiet a restless child:—
And the sentry, by the song beguiled,
'Neath the window sat down in the starlight there,
As the notes came soft on the silent air:—

* “The deer and the doe and the little lithe fawn
Have sped through the wildwood from pipes of the dawn,
So the deer and the doe and the little fawn now
Are weary, my dearie, and so art thou;
So weary, my dearie!

They fled from the twang of the red man's bow,
The deer and the fawn and the startled doe,
They lingered long by the bright river's brim,
Till the sunset clouds grew gray and dim;
So weary, my dearie!

* [This Lullaby was written to be read with this poem, by my daughter,
Mrs. Alice Barber Coleman, who has also written music for it.—H. H. B.]

The fawn and the doe and the antlered deer
Follow the call of the katydid clear
To fragrant fields where the firefly gleams
Will light them into the land of dreams;—
Weary, my dearie!

Now the deer and the doe and the little lithe fawn
Are fallen asleep till the pipes of the dawn,
For the deer and the doe and the little fawn now
Are weary, my dearie, and so art thou,—
Weary, my dearie!"

More and more distant the music seems
Till the sweet strains pass into happy dreams,
And the watchman his listening posture kept
While the child and mother and watchman slept,—
And the stealthy foe nearer and nearer crept!
The same old legend, fulfilled the same;—
While the watchman slept, the enemy came!

Over the palisades,
Where the crusted snow-drift aids,
In the darkness before the dawn,
In the furtive way of their forest raids
The murderous horde came on.
And the watchman woke with a start,
As the terrible yell arose,
To see the inclosure in every part
Swarming with deadly foes.

Terror was everywhere
And the wild despairing cry,
As gunshot and shouting filled the air,
And many rose up but to die.
Huddled together, and bound,
And threatened with dreadful death,
Women and children saw around
Flames and fierce fighting, and heard the sound
Of crashing axes and crackling doors,
And shrieks from under the falling floors
Where the household was stifled beneath.

But one door held fast, with its doubled planks,
 And deep-clinched spikes in their close-set ranks
 Still stoutly barred to its massive posts,
 Strong-built to baffle the savage hosts;—
 But the axes at last made a passage through
 For the musket its murderous work to do,—
 So Ensign Sheldon's wife was slain,
 And his children swelled the captive train.

But the eldest son, with his brave young bride,
 From the window leaped on a sheltered side,
 And though she was lamed they were unespied;
 Unable to fly, she yet urged her spouse
 To haste with the news and the Valley rouse:—
 And though sorely loth young Sheldon ran
 Ten miles with half-bandaged and freezing feet,
 As none but a desperate woodsman can,
 And from Hatfield and Hadley brought succor meet:
 While the nobly self-forgetting wife
 As hardily bore the captive life,
 Painfully joining the long retreat
 Shared serenely the lot of that hapless train,
 And, ransomed, returned to her husband again.

Another house not far away
 Helped also partly to save the day;
 Benoni Stebbins kept up the fight,
 Sent the foeman fleeing to left and right,
 And when he was struck down the garrison—
 Seven men and some women—fought stoutly on,
 Held the savage at bay till the rising sun,
 And though "almost spent" yet gallantly won;
 "At the very pinch," is the record's claim,
 The Hadley and Hatfield helpers came,
 And the baffled French and their red allies
 Drew sulkily off with half their prize.

Then the terrible northward march began,
 The marshalled captives, the gathered loot,

The attempted rescue, and vain pursuit;
The sinking women, and man after man
Savagely slain as their strength gave out,—
More than a month on that dreadful route.

And the crowning cruelty! Far and wide
The victims were scattered on every side,—
Parents and children sundered far,
Claimed by the red man as prizes of war;
In the forest wigwam taught to forget
The old home faith and the old home ties,
Till the maiden an alien suitor met,
And the lad came to see with a savage's eyes,
And learned the wilderness life to prize;—
Or, hemmed in by border or nunnery life,
The tender mother or parted wife
Longed for the tidings that did not come
Of the far away unforgotten home.
And as years went by, and release came not
Grew heart-sick, as if by that home forgot.

But not for a moment forgotten there,
These victims of heartbreak and slow despair;
The harried village stood blackened and lone,
Many dwellings unpeopled for many days,
Till the inmates came back from the wilderness ways:
One stood here till days well down to our own
Whose beheaded, battered portal, stout door posts and all,
Now fittingly graces Memorial Hall.

Here Ensign Sheldon was left alone,
But with faith still unbroken and spirit untired,
He labored and journeyed like one inspired;
And as soldier and deacon, and selectman,
Served the state and the church in the township's van;—
Petitioned, and pleaded, and sent report
To Governor, Council, and General Court,
Urging thought and speed for ransom to go
To the captives held by the far-off foe;

And when another winter had come
John Sheldon set forth from his desolate home,
As the Province's agent joyfully went
On a mission of mercy and rescue sent;—
Into the wilderness plunged once more,
Privations and perils manfully bore,—
The wintry blast and the treacherous shore
Of river and lake, and the terrible strain
Of ambush from yet more treacherous men;—
Three hundred miles on this merciful quest
Three times he trod ere his feet had rest,
Till success, long delayed, grew to better and best.

Meantime, with the captives the Jesuits wrought,
Creed and catechism strenuously taught,
Promise and ban of the Church they brought,
With hopes and terrors skillfully fraught,
And the children's fancy artfully caught
With incense and candles and solemn rites,
And with constant pressure through days and nights,
While the months went by and no ransom came,—
What wonder that converts grew apace
As the new-found home grew a home-like place?
So that many forebore to return again,
Or by new-formed ties were drawn to remain?
So the young men chose French or Indian brides,
For the priests urged marriage on man and maid
In the Church's name, till, allured or afraid,
Many made them new homes in the stranger land,
Received a new faith at the stranger's hand,
And came no more to the old firesides.

But the story is told, with relish keen,
That one spirited Deerfield girl of seventeen
Proved more than a match for the priest's hot zeal;
When he kept urging his tiresome appeal
And her duty to marry then and there,—
With a Catholic bridegroom slyly in ken,—
She rose in her place and modestly said:—
"I am now convinced, and am ready to wed,

If one of my fellow-captives will!"

And one there was, as she doubtless knew,
Who was more than ready the part to fulfil,
And promptly came forward with resolute air;
So the baffled priest was forced to do,
What his office required for the canny pair,
And to marry the heretics then and there.
So Sarah Hoyt, the tradition said,
And Ebenezer Nims were wed.

More than a hundred ransomed souls,—
As many as missing on Deerfield's rolls,
Though to many sad households not the same—
Through Sheldon out of the prison house came;—
His mission to comfort, release and bless,
As he braved in the wintry wilderness
Perils of lurking savage foes,
Perils of waters, and keen distress
Of slow starvation or long duress,
Perils of torture,—all he chose
To save to freedom, native home and faith
Children and neighbors in the hapless town
And, as the record truly saith,
Still other captives all the Valley down.

Thrice this chivalric and undaunted man,
After this work of ransom and relief began,
So painfully adventured and heroically endured;
Through long delays and stern refusals waited,
Baffled, put off with diplomatic art,
By Jesuitic trick time and again checkmated,
But keeping firm resolve and never losing heart,
Till first a few, and then a larger part,
Were to his constancy and strong demand assured:
At last all rescued, free at last to come,
Free to relight the blackened hearth, rebuild the ruined home!
All, save the homes forever desolate,
Missing the children or the household mate!
All, save the forty slaughtered in the first surprise,
All, save the twenty perished in the wilderness;

All, save the fallen in the rash pursuit,—
The forms forever fled, the lips forever mute!
And all but those who in the savage ways and dress,
The wilder, freer life, the lawless enterprise
Of wild adventure and the open skies,
Found fuller scope for youthful storm and stress,
And brooked no more the stricter Puritan life;—

Or taught by priest and nun,
By terrors holden or by kindness won.
(Thank God that in that time of savage strife,
The human heart,
Revealing often its diviner part,
Made many a noble friendship, many a new love start.)
So new-found ties of faith and home
Held freely bound some lives that else had come
Back to the yearning hearts whence they were torn,
Back to the broken households waiting them forlorn.

But, for the rest,
Each scattered brood possessed
Its old-time nest,
Or o'er its ashes built the home anew
To manful enterprise and steadfast purpose true;—
Reformed the civic order, opened again the house of prayer,
And set the sacred candlestick aflame for service there;
The "Redeemed Captive" pastor back again their fate and faith to share;
Holding at "not a blackberry's worth"
The flattering offers of the Papist North
If he the Roman doctrine would declare
Renounce the Pilgrim faith, and settle there.

So Ensign Sheldon's rescue work was done,
A work in stern resolve and bitter loss begun,
Through steadfastness and long endurance well achieved,—
Record worth handing down from sire to son,
Never of honor here to be bereaved;
But in this monumental legend told,
With other tales of the brave days of old,
Set here and there in script of bronze or stone;
Recounting scenes of tragedy and woe,

Our hearts to set aglow,
Till we more largely know
That faith and helpful service and high sacrifice
Are the great forces that alone suffice
To guard a people's ways,
Through all their peaceful as their stormier days

O town of fertile fields and pleasant homes,
O peaceful vale to which no terror comes,
Of high, heroic memories,
Embosoming shade and sunny skies,
The fathers looked not backward, but before!
Read you the lesson right,
Their toils and trust requite,
Bear in your day the worthy part in theirs they bore!
While of their fortitude and noble record glad,

Fail not to add
That service of the living which is honor to the dead;—
“Thanksgiving is the best thanksgiving,” Parson Williams said!

Two hundred years and more,
Since the Grand Monarque's pride
Essayed to bring the Stuart back to England's throne and shore,
And the wise settlement of many years defied;

For this each countryside
In far New England burst in flame and ran with blood;—
The murderous savage lurked in every wood,
And fell like pestilence upon each sleeping town,
Striking the strong man and the infant down,
Leaving the newly-planted village desolate,
Fire-blackened home-sites and deserted street,
Victim of bootless war and causeless hate;
And making, by the captives' bleeding feet
The wintry forest trail to far Quebec again
A *Via Dolorosa*, path of pain!

Again, and once again,
Since those far tragic days,
The heavy tread of armed men
Has sounded through the forest ways;

On the old Indian track
Northward the conquering Briton went,
On far colonial conquest bent,
In that great game of strength and chance,
Set England's lion 'gainst the lilies of France,
The high stake sovereignty, the target Quebec;—
Each young chivalric captain's tragic fate
The theme of martial poesy and romance,

While History's blood-stained page,
Heroic record of a stormy age,
Their myrtle and their laurel deck.

And, later, when our sires
Warfare for independence fires,
They take the same historic route,
Through oft-repeated failures wearing out
The world-power they so stubbornly assailed;
So, while their special project failed,
Their spirit greatedened, and their cause prevailed!
Kingdoms have fallen, and great nations grown;
And near a peaceful century flown,
Since that last warful pilgrimage.

Rises a better age
Of international peace,
Heeding Humanity's high call
Moving to-day, within the hearts of all,—
A spirit steadfastly intent
To compass war's surcease,
And bring the genial arbitrament
Of friendly counsellings and mutual consent;
And we, Americans, may well rejoice
That to our country leadership is given
To urge all peoples to this better choice,
The long "Desire of Nations," and the way approved of Heaven!

The ancient Chinese Sage,
When asked for one great word
Whence all the wisdom gained through every age
To teach all human welfare might be well inferred,

Pondered a moment, and then made reply,—

“Is not this great word *Reciprocity*?”

The kindred blood that flows
Within our veins, and those
Of alien neighbors sprung from that old captive train,
Unites with stronger ties,
Formed through the centuries,
To make joyous response to that great word now uttered once again!

Among heroic names,
We celebrate the claims
Of men who helped to make their homes our own;
Who wrought in field and wood,
Who ventured fire and flood,
And planted fair abodes where first these fields were sown.

Their steadfast hardiness,
Their triumph o'er distress,
To ruined homes and kindred graves still turning back;
To venture yet again,
Enduring toil and strain,
To meet the fierce attack, or tread once more the captive track!

Honor the men who built the outpost town,
Their valorous ventures its dear-bought renown!
Honor the man who brought the captives back,
Braving the savage and the wintry wrack!
Honor to those who patiently have wrought,
In records dim, by graves obscure, have sought
The faded lines of ancient kin to track,
And many an unknown fate to new remembrance brought;
Honor, thrice honor, to the man,
Our many-yeared sage,
And always youthful antiquarian,
Whose ever green old age
For us and for the after time has borne
Rich harvest of historic lore,

And this fair Valley's dim and stormy morn
With storied charm and fresh romance has brightened o'er;
And set the pious fashion of memorial days
To keep the children in remembrance of the Fathers' ways!

Another tablet here he fitly rears
To mark the spot,
Where his far ancestor in those eventful years
Builted, endured, and bravely wrought.

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